

A RATIONALE FOR EVENTS: AN AGENDA FOR CHANGE

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Individual Events Forensics has been called an educational laboratory by many of its supporters and participants. The highest goals of the activity are met when the opportunities provided to students are effective in building skills and increasing awareness of communicative choices and responsibilities. The challenge of this conference is how best to determine the events which can meet most effectively the needs of our students and the pedagogical perspective embodied by competitive speech activities.

We meet in a time of continuing crisis for our activity. Programs find themselves under siege by student funding authorities with changing priorities, by administrations with growing financial constraints, and by colleagues who may not perceive the same values we believe are borne in the activity. The low level of regular exposure to individual events may explain the disinterest of some individuals or groups, but the concern expressed by many within the field of speech communication cannot be dismissed lightly. If we find ourselves unable to represent ourselves effectively or to defend our educational basis sufficiently to our own discipline, we will discover increasing difficulty in acquiring the means to pursue what we believe to be legitimate academic pursuits. Without the support of our colleagues and a clear role as a co-curricular function of a healthy department, we will find growing skepticism among the groups which give us our opportunities that we are central to the missions they perceive as important. Rather than bemoan the assumed ignorance or question the motives of those who apparently do not share our enthusiasm for intercollegiate speech activities, instead let us examine some of the trends which may have brought us to this position of disfavor and instability in many institutions. To realize our hopes for Individual Events we must explore the genesis of those aspects of our activity that cause concern in the minds of others.

This paper takes the position that the maturation of forensics as an activity tends to lead to the institutionalization of internal criteria which do not meet the assumptions others may hold about the goals of desirable programs of speech training. I believe the active pursuit of change for the sake of a dynamic, progressive enterprise is necessary to ensure the continued health, vitality and accepted legitimacy of this educational opportunity. Others may find virtue where I see vice: The continuing value of Individual Events for its participants is made manifest in most participants. However, as more departments decide to cut our budgets rather than some other area, and as more stu-

dent governments seek to trim a budget of "least essential" items, we must question whether the qualities we desire are recognized by those who provide our ability to exist. If those desired qualities are not clear to others, we must question the elements or conditions which make the communication of our goals difficult. To retain or regain our integral role in many institutions, we must discover the means to assert our essential function as communication educators providing students with important skills through a specialized form of instruction. We may wish to re-examine the degree to which our events reflect to those outside the activity the educational ends for which we strive.

I believe the integrity of our endeavor is compromised most when the notion of the educational laboratory is most disregarded. All who view a given event over the span of several years begin to develop ideas of what topics will be successful, which pieces will be accepted, and how much of a particular eccentricity will be tolerated. Continued exposure to a given set of examples is always likely to reinforce certain qualities and to emphasize trends. The large number of problem solution health-related persuasions at the national tournaments tends to make the continuation of the criteria that value clear solutions to life-threatening problems more likely. The creation of such criteria as internal to the activity poses a threat to the notion of forensics as a laboratory. I would call the trend toward institutionalizing internal criteria the outcome of a product orientation to individual events. This product orientation now dominates the creation of criteria in many areas of forensic education, which may lead to the further estrangement of our method from those who must judge its value.

There are strengths and weaknesses to the product orientation. Among the strengths are the ability to coach with a measure of assurance that certain choices may have reasonably predictable outcomes. The ability to view the transformation of an event's tradition over a span of several years can provide an appreciation of the changing nature of an educational effort. The existence of clear criteria and plentiful role models can make the qualities expected of successful speakers quickly evident.

The weaknesses of the product orientation may be more compelling, however. The toll which repeated viewing of similar prose pieces has on coaches may be reflected in the turnover of forensic positions: After a coach has seen a few hundred selections which begin humorously but end with poignancy, the ability to provide novel insight may fade. The same effect is seen often among students who gain an early understanding of the implicit rules of an event, only to lose any sense of continued challenge. Events and their judging criteria become fixed (as in the predominance of problem-solution persuasions). Some students become specialists in certain events or performers of certain pieces without understanding explicitly how those skills and choices can be transferred to other events or selections. Too many learn the

ability to pander to a judge without learning the responsibility to adapt to an audience. The creation and maintenance of criteria internal to the institution of individual events may limit the appeal, effectiveness, and desirability of individual events for many students and colleges. The product orientation does not provide sufficiently for the dynamic, creative experience which this educational laboratory can provide. Additionally, the emphasis on the internal criteria of an event may limit the explicit understanding of principles of communication which transcend that event. The product orientation may allow some students to succeed in certain events without necessarily knowing the reasons behind their success.

The current focus on the production of performances to meet the needs of a relatively stable set of events emphasizes the product orientation. It is less effective to communicate to a funding authority or to a community group or to concerned parents or colleagues that we teach people how to "do" prose or impromptu. I doubt those outside Individual Events much care what our events are. I believe administrators are interested in the form and content of our instruction and in the skills students learn as a result of participation. The product orientation clouds the relationship between the events and the desired skills. The event "Persuasive Speaking" constrains the student who may wish to inspire an audience (though inspiration is an important persuasive skill). The event "Poetry Interpretation" inhibits the contestant who may want to fully enact his or her personae (though the term "performance" has superseded "interpretation" in the intellectual commerce of the discipline). As events do not allow students to explore the widest possible range of communicative experiences and options, events may be seen to be a factor limiting the effectiveness of Individual Events as an educational laboratory.

An alternative to the focus on a few stable, national events may be found by changing the orientation from the product to that of the process. Forensics is not the sum total of its events. Our challenge is to teach students the skills they will need to survive in a dynamic communicative environment. The generative principles behind event choice should be the skills we believe we should be teaching our students provided those skills can be taught within the competitive framework of Individual Events. The educational goals set forth at the Second National Developmental Conference on Forensics can be achieved through a variety of activities and exercises. The emphasis should be on the skills and not the events. The events should be constructed in such a way that will make the desired skills explicit to students within the activity as well as to audiences outside Forensics. Our goal should be to create events which will communicate the benefits they offer as well as the topic matter they cover or the form they may take.

The center of this proposal is to provide for the consistent emphasis of certain communicative skills through a variety of communication opportuni-

ties. While the status quo allows for different performance options, students also find themselves locked into a tradition beyond their making. Rarely do our students have the freedom provided by events which are new to the critics as well as to themselves. While new events may be more difficult to judge and coach, they also may be more powerful when teaching students about the ambiguity of most communication settings. Students should be allowed to participate in the creation of traditions as well as the perpetuation of conventional practices. Individual Events should institutionalize change as a means of ensuring students the most complete educational experience possible within the framework of a competitive setting. A variety of event options which pursue the same educational goals may be one of the most effective means to ensure the validity and academic acceptance of this communication laboratory.

To illustrate the variety of events which may be able to fulfill the educational goals of our activity, I offer a list of suggestions:

- Literary Analysis
- Rhetorical Situation Adaptation
- Courtroom Advocacy
- Extemporaneous Interpretation
- Performance of Literature
- Storytelling
- Oral History
- Oral Essay
- Inspirational Speaking
- Demonstration Speaking
- Public Relations Speaking
- Crisis Management Speaking

These are a few different events which may be able to provide for students opportunities to create speeches without the weight of previous expectations of judges placing too many restrictions on the communicative choices of students. The emergent quality of the criteria for the events would allow students to see the process of forensics come to full flower. The opportunity to use the same basic skills in a variety of different communication settings may allow a student to appreciate better the skills and competencies needed in a broader range of settings yet.

An assumption underlying this offering is that the guiding principles behind any event can be elucidated. The educational goals of our events should be made more explicit than they are currently perceived to be by many students. Event descriptions should do more than explain do's and don't's of time and form. They should also express the educational intent or the skill the student should be able to gain by participating. With clearer event descriptions, the central themes which underlie most communicative exchanges may be seen to repeat themselves in a variety of venues. More explanatory event descriptions

could help to reinforce the goals of the creativity for our students and to communicate our efforts to other audiences as well. These explanations could attempt to guide students to the values of communication we hope to instill as well as the skills we hope to impart.

In addition to the tenets that events should be built around communicative competencies and that the educational goals should be made more explicit, three other goals to pursue in the creation of a rationale for events emerge:

1. Events should be reasonably clear to members of the general public. Individual Events should attempt to make its events as accessible as possible to members of the community at large. Those outside the activity should be able to discern the basic goals and intent of events.

2. Students should be given the opportunity to experiment in a variety of opportunities. Variety for the sake of variety may be sufficient reason for introducing a new event. Students must be allowed and encouraged to see that the general principles which apply in one communicative act apply in others. The idea of the "Event" should be demystified. The idea of the process of communication should be emphasized instead. To further this goal, students should be allowed to recognize their role in the creation and renewal of this institution. The regular introduction of new events can serve to demonstrate the development of criteria and expectations and responses in a communicative laboratory.

3. Our events should employ the larger concerns of the discipline of speech communication. Our interpretation events should be brought in line with the theories being developed in performance studies (for example). We must not allow ourselves to fall out of step with the rest of the field. The respectability of our educational efforts rely on maintaining currency with our colleagues' research. However, we must not compromise those things which make our contribution to the field unique.

The position of this paper is quite simple: To remain available resource for the communication training of students in the future, we must commit ourselves to the institutionalization of change within our activity. We should attempt to impress upon students that we are preparing them for life beyond forensics. We as critics should be clear that we are looking for effective application of skills that are generally applicable, and not just those behaviors which constitute a good example of some individual event. We should encourage experimentation. We should discourage predictable formats. We should teach our students to be flexible.

To make the desired skills more central part of the choice and explanation of events, and to ensure that the skills remain the focus by accepting a positive attitude toward changing events may make Individual Events more clearly part of the educational mission which some institutions hope to ensure.